

Why Nonprofits Need to be Storytellers

To Andy Goodman, a nationally recognized author, speaker, and consultant in the field of public interest communications, storytelling is integral to a nonprofit's ability to advance its mission. Stories can shape people; they can inspire them to think and act differently. Stories are what can connect your nonprofit's community, funders, beneficiaries, and employees with your cause and vision.

In this Q&A, Goodman discusses the importance of storytelling for nonprofits and how nonprofits and their leaders can approach blending powerful stories with data to advance their organizations' missions.

Nonprofits need to influence behavior change across many different stakeholders. How can storytelling help them to do this effectively?

Andy Goodman: The key words here are "influence behavior." Think about the way that your mind works. We have stories in our brains about how the world works. And they act like filters. They act like software. The stories tell us what facts to accept and what facts to reject. So whenever you're trying to influence someone's behavior, you have to ask yourself first, "What story is in their brain? What stories are they holding onto that make them behave the way they do? And if I want to change that, you need to ask yourself, "What new story can I give them?" (For a classic example, see the sidebar "Changing the Story in the Fight to Abolish the Death Penalty.")

Nonprofits today track all sorts of metrics that illustrate their effectiveness to stakeholders. Can data take the place of a story or be useful in telling it?

Goodman: It's not to say that nonprofits shouldn't bother with the evidence. It's that in the one-two punch of persuasion. The "one" is the story that gets people to pay attention to you for a second. And then you come in with a number two punch, which is the data that says, "And I've got more than one story to tell you. This one story I told you is illustrative of hundreds of stories, thousands of stories. Here are the numbers that back up what I'm saying."

What I find when working with nonprofits is often they've had it beat into them that they need the data. You must produce the evidence, the metrics, etc., to get that foundation grant. So they have the numbers. But what they don't realize is that in the act of persuasion, if somebody has a story in his or her head that says, "You know, I don't care about dropouts. My kids are through college. This is not my issue." And if you say to them, "Do you realize a child drops out every 26 seconds?" Their response is, "I don't care." So the numbers won't cut through. You've got to give them a story first that tells them, "This does matter to you. It does affect you. You have to respond to this, and here's the data that will further make the case."

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What if you don't have compelling numbers but have the stories?

Goodman: You have to have a combination. The stories alone are not enough. People are wary of being conned, and I think people know that almost anybody can produce one good story to tug at the heart strings. So if you only have the stories, if you don't really have the data, you haven't done the due diligence. Ultimately if you're looking for serious investments in what you do, if you're looking for serious support, the serious evaluators will say, "Well, that's a wonderful story. Where's the data that shows me you have more than one story to be told?"

Will one story work for everyone?

Goodman: I don't know if Dr. Seuss ever said this, but if he didn't, he should have: People are people wherever you go. I think that human beings respond to stories: a well-told, authentic story will work with anybody, any culture, any age. It's just the nature of the game. But how you tell the story and the way you pitch a story does depend on the audience. I tell my clients that they have to ask, "Who am I talking to? And how am I going to tell them this story in a way that most resonates with them?" You always want to ask yourself, "Who's the audience? What matters to them? Now, in the story I'm going to tell them, how do I put that at the forefront?" You might tell the story from a different perspective. There might be a different protagonist in your story. There might be certain aspects of the story, certain values that you can emphasize because often contained within a story are lots of different people and different values and different angles.

Think of the story itself as gold. You mine the gold, capture the story. Then you bring it back to your office and you need to pound that gold into different shapes and sizes depending on whom you're talking to, or also where you're telling it. If you're telling it on the web, and it's a long story, you might want to do it in video or audio. If you're telling it in an annual report where you can have beautiful four-color pictures and text, now you have more tools to work with for a reader. If you're telling it orally, that's another style altogether. The story is the story, but how you tell it and who you tell it to is malleable. (For an example of storytelling to different audiences, see the sidebar "A Win-Win Partnership to Vaccinate More Children.")

How can nonprofits leverage different technologies to tell their stories in different ways?

Goodman: Step one is to become systematic about capturing and saving your stories. Either have people or

Changing the Story in the Fight to Abolish the Death Penalty

In this excerpt from the interview, Andy Goodman shares a powerful example of how a whole new story told by advocates of abolishing the death penalty helped moved the needle on their cause.

For years in this country, 1960s, 70s, 80s, it was a tough go because the majority of Americans had a story in their heads that worked for them, and the story was one that goes back to the code of Hammurabi, "An eye for an eye. You kill somebody, you deserve to die." Just as simple as that. It just feels equitable deep in our bones. The people trying to abolish the death penalty tried data. They said, "Look at the numbers. Statistics prove that the death penalty is not a stronger deterrent than a life sentence. You can prove that with the numbers." Statistics prove that it's being enforced inequitably, more people of color being executed than white people. People would nod their heads, and they'd say, "Sorry. An eye for an eye. You kill somebody, you deserve to die."

Then they tried a new story and said, "It's immoral for a state to sanction killing. If you believe in the Ten Commandments, Thou shalt not kill, how can you believe in letting the state kill people?" To that, Americans replied, "You're right. It's immoral. Thou shalt not kill. But if you do, you still deserve to die."

Nothing worked until 1992 when the Innocence Project came along, and they started to tell a whole new story: There are people who have been convicted of murder, sentenced to death, and executed for their crimes who were later exonerated due to DNA evidence.

We are making mistakes that can never be corrected because of this system. In other words, the story became innocent people have been killed due to this law, due to this system, and to that people couldn't simply shake their heads and

systems in place that help you constantly look for these stories, and then once you get a story, someone should write it up in some standardized format and it should go into a story bank, whether it's a folder or a file on your website or whatever. It's a place to store these stories so that when someone calls up and says, "Oh, I've got a reporter asking about this city." Or, "I've got to testify in front of this legislature and I heard this great story," they know where to get it and because of various tags, they can find the story that they want.

Then there are all kinds of ways to use them. You just have to acknowledge that for every use there will be a slightly different version of the story. There are some places where it's got to be short and sweet. If you want to tell a story that takes more time to tell, and you can get someone for two or three minutes, then you may want to think about how the story will play as a video or as an audio podcast. If I'm going to tell the story in a presentation, I want to make sure I tell it in a vivid fashion so it's visual and people can picture it in their mind's eye. All of those things come into play.

As far as social media goes, Twitter is a great tool to use as a pointer. With 140 characters you can point somebody to a place where they can read or watch a story. Social media is mostly a way of pointing people to the stories that will live somewhere else.

How can you use stories internally with employees to help inspire their work?

Goodman: When I work with nonprofits, I teach them six categories of stories that I think every nonprofit should collect. [They are] part of what we call the "sacred bundle." Three categories are relevant here.

There's one category called **value stories**. Organizations will have their list of core values. You see that all the time and they're often the same: integrity, diversity, commitment to this, etc. It's a wonderful list of words, but you could put them on any website and say, "Here's our list of core values." What I ask organizations is, "Tell me stories of your people living and expressing those values in their work." If perseverance is a core value, tell me the perseverance story. Tell me a story about Carole and what she did that showed perseverance. Partnership a core value? Tell me the partnership story. Have these stories ready so that when people ask you about your organization's values, you can respond not with a list but with stories.

Another category is called the **striving to improve stories**. Lots of organizations will tell you, "We are a learning organization. We learn from our mistakes." Tell me a story that shows that. Tell me a story where somebody made a mistake but learned from it and did better next time. I think those are extremely healthy to have, because invariably when someone does screw up, you want to be able to throw your arm around his or her shoulder and say, "You know what? It

say, "An eye for an eye," because now we were talking about cases where, metaphorically, the eye had not been taken.

We started to see a sea change. [According to a CNN poll] as of October of 2011, after years and years of advocacy and years and years of getting these stories out there, for the first time in the history of polling the number passed 50 percent of Americans who favor a life sentence over the death penalty.

If you talked to people who work on this issue, they'll tell you that certainly the science advanced and we have more evidence. But it was the stories that got out through the media and through television and movies that told the stories of the wrongly accused and wrongly convicted that started to change the way people think.

To me, that's the most classic example where the only way to change how people think on a large scale is to dislodge the existing story in their head, and give them a new story that makes more sense to them.

happens. Carole made a similar mistake. Let me tell you the story about the mistake she made, how she learned from it, and how she did better next time because that's how we do it here."

Also, this might seem obvious, but another is the **creation story**: the 'how we started' story. I think that if you work for an organization, you should be able to answer the question, "Where did this organization come from? Who started it? When? Why?" Often in your nonprofit's history there's something about the spirit of the people who started the place and why they started it that may still inform your work today, and it's worth knowing about.

A classic example here is the Environmental Defense Fund. It was started by a small conservation group on Long Island who saw that the eggshells of ospreys were thinning and the birds were dying off. They thought, "This is bad. We love these birds. They're native to Long Island. They're beautiful. Why's this happening?" And so they started to pursue it and fought it all the way into court. They ultimately got a ban on DDT because of this curiosity and this issue.

That story is important because from that the organization was founded, but 35 years later when they went looking for a slogan for their organization, they came up with, "Finding the ways that work." That characterizes their very first victory up to their most recent victory. So to know EDF's history is to understand why it has the tagline it has today. And everyone who works there must know that story. I think that's true of every organization.

[These are crucial to organizational culture] because at the same time other stories can circulate that I call the **profane bundle**. Here's how they work: someone gets hired to work at an organization, he goes through the orientation meeting, and as he comes out an old timer throws an arm around his shoulder and says, "Let me tell you how things really work around here." Those are the negative stories; the cynical stories about the problems of an organization.

The point is that every organization has its stories, its internal stories, and its internal lore. And if management doesn't consciously foster and spread the positive stories, the profane bundle will find its way in and take over. There's a cultural imperative to telling good cultural stories; not Pollyanna, rose-colored glasses stories, because you also tell the stories of the troubles, etc. But if you're a healthy organization, you have a good set of stories that say, "This is who we are. This is what we've struggled with. This is

A Win-Win Partnership to Vaccinate More Children

In this excerpt from the interview, Andy Goodman shares an example of a nonprofit and a for-profit partnering to help vaccinate more children against maternal and neonatal tetanus. Both supported the goal of more vaccinations but had to appeal to different audiences to achieve it.

I just spoke at The Cause Marketing Forum. This was for both nonprofits and corporations who come together for cross-marketing campaigns. A classic success story I heard about was an effort between Procter and Gamble (P&G) and UNICEF to help pay for more vaccines against maternal and neonatal tetanus. So P&G came up with a campaign where for certain packages of Pampers® that you bought, the purchase price would also pay for one vaccine for a child in Africa to be vaccinated against tetanus.

From UNICEF's point of view, it's all about, "How do we protect more kids?" From P&G's point of view, yes, they certainly want to do that, too. But the main attraction for them, to be perfectly honest, was that when you go in the focus groups and talk to people about diapers, there are certain buyers out there, they call them Private Label Loyalists, who will just basically buy the cheapest diaper because they're on kid number two, three, or four. They know the kid's not going to drop dead depending on what diaper you give them. And they're basically shopping for price. So to them, it's all the same.

But in focus groups they said to them, "Well, hold on a second. Look at this package of Pampers. If you buy this, it'll pay for one vaccination to save one life in the third world. Would that make a difference to you?" And to that, these Private Label Loyalists said, "Yes," and that they would buy it. In fact, it became a

how we've gotten to where we are. This is where we're going."

Andy Goodman is a nationally recognized author, speaker and consultant in the field of public interest communications. Along with [Storytelling as Best Practice](#), he is author of [Why Bad Ads Happen to Good Causes](#) and [Why Bad Presentations Happen to Good Causes](#). He also publishes a monthly journal, [free-range thinking](#), to share best practices in the field.

hugely successful campaign that was rolled out in Western Europe and eventually went global because it sold more Pampers.

Now, that's a cause marketing success story. On UNICEF's side, it's about a partnership that helped them vaccinate more kids. On P&G's side it's about a way to sell more products that also does some good in the world. But depending on who's telling that story and who they're telling it to, it's either about saving kids or building brand loyalty. Same story.